

THE CHURCH OF CHRIST

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The Church of Christ

THE CHURCH OF CHRIST:

A Discourse

BY

RICHARD W. DICKINSON, D.D.

Εἰς Κύριον, μία πίστις, ἐν βάπτισμά.

NEW YORK:

CHARLES SCRIBNER, 145 NASSAU STREET.

1851.

LANCASTER, May 13, 1851.

To the Rev. R. W. DICKINSON, D.D.

Rev. and Dear Sir—The undersigned, members of the Presbyterian congregation of the city of Lancaster, having listened with great interest to the discourse preached by you on last Sunday morning at the dedication of their new church edifice, and believing that the views set forth are strictly in accordance with the teachings of the Bible, do most respectfully request that you will furnish them with a copy for publication.

GEORGE S. BRYAN,
ROBERT D. CARSON,
MILLER TRAIM,
SAMUEL HUMES,
CHARLES M. HOWELL,
ROBERT MODERWELL,
HUGH S. GARA,

CHARLES BOUGHTER,
JOHN REYNOLDS,
H. M. CHEVE,
JAMES B. LANE,
JOHN MILLER,
D. W. PATTERSON,
JAMES EVANS.

NEW YORK, May 24th, 1851.

GENTLEMEN—

Aside from the importance of making known the reasons for our Church polity, it is greatly to be desired that these reasons should be better understood by all professing the Presbyterian faith; and as you have placed so high an estimate on my discourse in expressing your conviction that "the views set forth are strictly in accordance with the teachings of the Bible," I cannot refrain from acceding to your wishes. The occasion on which it was delivered, was fraught with the deepest interest to my mind; and I trust its publication will tend to subserve the welfare of a church to which it was once my privilege to minister.

Yours, in the bonds of Christian fellowship,

R. W. DICKINSON,

TO MESSRS. BRYAN, CARSON, and others.

THE CHURCH OF CHRIST.

“And He is the head of the body—the Church.”—Col. i. 18.

WHAT homage is due to the Lord Jesus Christ; what deference to his authority; what confidence in his sufficiency to save even to the uttermost! Who that respects the teachings of Revelation can fail to ascribe unto him, all glory and honor, dominion and power, thanksgiving, and blessing, and praise? The head of all beings, in virtue of having created them, so is He the head of his people, in virtue of having redeemed them; “for it pleased the Father that in him should all fulness dwell,” that He might be the head of the new as well as of the old creation.

Without further preliminary, let it be con-

sidered, that his title as head of the Church, is founded in the right of redemption, so that in all things "He might have the pre-eminence." Hence we read: "The Church of God which he hath purchased with his own blood."—"We are come to the Church of the first born."—"Christ loved the Church, and gave himself for it," "that he might present it to himself a glorious Church, not having spot or wrinkle, or any such thing."

The Church, therefore, comprises the whole number of the redeemed and sanctified from among the children of men. As *invisible*, it comprises those alone who, called of God into the fellowship of the gospel, are united to Christ by a living faith; but as *visible*, it embraces all those over the face of the earth who profess to believe in Christ, and acknowledge him as their Saviour and Head—"unto which Christ has given the ministry, oracles and ordinances of God for the gathering and perfecting of the saints in this life, to the end of the world."

In the latter, there may be more or less

ignorance, error, and worldliness—the tares and the wheat growing in the same field ; but the former, though not free from sin, is nevertheless holy unto the Lord,—all its members having been born of God, and being sanctified through his truth. The one, distinguishable as any human society by the names, regulations, meetings and doings of its members, falls under the cognizance of the senses ; but the other, neither separated from the world in respect to place, nor distinguished from the world by outward appendages, is spiritual in its nature, qualifications, and exercises, and is known with unerring certainty only by Him who “searcheth the heart and trieth the reins of the children of men.” This is that Church, to which all the promises of God are made ; in which he dwells by his life-giving, peace-speaking, purifying, transforming Spirit—even that body of which Christ is the head.

Used in a restricted sense, the term *Church*, refers to a company of Christian believers with their children, associated and

meeting together in one place for the solemn worship of God; or “a congregation of faithful men in which the true word of God is preached, and the sacraments duly administered according to Christ’s ordinances, in all those things that of necessity are requisite to the same.” Hence, we read of the *messengers* not of the Church, but “of the churches,” and of “the churches which were in Christ;” of “the seven churches which were in Asia;” the churches which were in Galatia; the churches throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria; the church at Philippi; the church at Colosse; and “the church of God which is at Corinth.”

In some instances, the term, as is evident from such passages as these: “Greet the church that is in the house of Aquila and Priscilla;” “Salute the church which is in the house of Nymphas,”—served to denote, if not a single family, at most but a few individuals associated in observing the institutions of the Gospel.

But the people of God, whenever or wherever they may have lived, and under whatever dispensation, whether the Patriarchal, the Jewish, or the Evangelical; or wherever they may now be, whether residing in divers places on the earth, or bowing before the throne of God in heaven; are all members of that body of which Jesus Christ is the head. “Unto the church of God which is at Corinth, to them that are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, with all that in every place call upon the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both theirs and ours:—for as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ; for by one Spirit we are all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free, and have been all made to drink into one Spirit.” Hence, in the days of the Apostles, as the disciples were called by the distinctive name of *Christians*, so were they all considered, though residing, and worshipping in different

places, as one body in Christ, and all members one of another.

What a spectacle must the Church of Christ have then presented! Harmony within, and uniformity without;—the same in doctrine, in worship, and in government—one in their faith, their feelings, and their practice.

But as the visible Church necessarily included some who were not truly saints, though they might at first have seemed to be regenerate, it was not long before the spirit of depravity began to operate, and to disturb the harmony and mar the symmetry of the Church, either by obtruding the claims of Judaism and the suggestions of philosophy falsely so called; or by provoking resistance to ecclesiastical authority. Thus, in the very church at Corinth a difficulty ensued among some of its members who severally contended, “I am of Paul, and I of Apollos, and I of Cephas, and I of Christ.”

Still, at that time, the visible church was not formally divided; nor was it until men

claimed to belong to the Church, notwithstanding their rejection of the fundamental principles of the gospel, that the term Catholic, or general, was employed to designate the true church, and to distinguish its members from the various heretics who derived their names either from the nature, or from the authors, of their peculiar opinions.

But no particular denomination of Christians is now entitled to be called, or may scripturally regard itself, in distinction from all others, as the Catholic or universal church; much less may any body of men claim the title of Catholic, as exclusively applicable to themselves, while they acknowledge any other head of the church than the Lord Jesus Christ.

Christendom presents to our view many conflicting sects; still, there is a visible Church Catholic, and all who profess the true religion, with their children, by whatever name they may be distinguished, constitute the true and only true Catholic Church.

It is not more preposterous for the Church of Rome, than for the Church of England, to regard itself as the only true Church; and in either case quite as absurd as the dispute between the Samaritans and the Jews, as to the exact location of the church,—whether on a mountain in Samaria, or in the city of Jerusalem? As God is a Spirit, all who worship him in spirit and in truth, are his true worshippers, be they where they may; and wherever *they are*, there is that Jerusalem which is the mother of us all. And in like manner, as Christ is the sole head of the Church, it follows that all who acknowledge the Head, believing in him and obeying his rule, belong to his body, “the Church:”—the Church, as such, comprising every Christian society which has been regularly constituted according to the fundamental principles of Christ and his Apostles; in which the truth as it is in Jesus is preached, and the sacraments administered according to his injunctions. In no other sense is the Church universal or Catholic; and this, too, is the only proper

sense in which it is one : not in reference to any particular form of government or mode of worship ; but simply, inasmuch as among all the various societies or churches of which it is composed, “ there is one Lord, one faith, one baptism ;” unity, resulting from certain great principles held in common, not from dogmatic arrangement, accidental position, or outward appendages—the unity, not of any uniform external organization, but of a spiritual brotherhood, sustaining the same relations to a common and blessed Head, bound together by the same holy affections, and going forth with diverse equipments and in different directions, to achieve the same victory—to attain the same inheritance.

I care not what multitudes may in one place respond to the Shibboleth of ecclesiastical party, let men only be united by a credible profession to the same Divine head ; let them embrace the same essential truths—worship the same God in spirit and in truth—feed on the same spiritual elements—grasp the same promises, and look forward to the

same haven of rest,—no matter where their earthly lot may be cast ; no matter by what name they may be called,—they are in a far truer, deeper sense *one*, than could be secured to them by any nominal relation or external uniformity. The former, in effect, belong to one and the same spiritual Church ; the same to which the spiritual part of God's people always belonged ; in which all the elect of God will finally be gathered, because He whom they acknowledge as their Head, is one and the same, “yesterday, to-day, and for ever :” yesterday, under the law ; to-day, under the gospel ; to-morrow and for ever, in the Kingdom of Glory. Either expected or commemorated by the people of God in all ages, at once the end of the law, and the sum and substance of the gospel, He is the source and centre of all true religion, from the beginning to the end of the world—the Redeemer of all times—the Saviour of all nations—the adoration of saints on earth, and of saints in Heaven.

When identity of ecclesiastical name, or

kneeling at an altar, becomes a matter of more vital importance to the soul, than oneness with Christ the Head; then, and not till then, may any Christian society presume to regard itself as the only true and exclusively Catholic Church.

For myself, I dare to say that I can hold communion with any one who exalts in his heart the great head of the Church; and whoever thus exalts Christ above any form of church polity or unessential rite, will not be backward to hold communion with me.

It is a fact well worthy of note, that the different sections of what we regard as the true Church, differ mainly only in relation to points not essential to salvation. It is the fact of their being united by a living faith to Christ, that constitutes them members of one body; and (with the exception of the close Communionists, who, in magnifying a form, have virtually, like the Tractarians, perverted the conditions of salvation;) it is little else than the difference in their views of church government and order, that precludes their

external union. Hence, the Presbyterian Church, the Congregational or Independent Church, and the Episcopal Church—distinctive terms, having, in each instance, a primary reference to their respective forms of church government.

Presbyterianism, in contradistinction from spiritual despotism, or the Papacy—from spiritual lordship, or Episcopacy—from spiritual democracy, or Independency, has been defined to be “spiritual republicanism;” and with marked propriety, inasmuch as it maintains that “Christ has made all ministers who are authorized to dispense the Word and Sacraments perfectly equal in official rank and power; that in every particular church, the immediate exercise of ecclesiastical power is deposited, not with the mass of the people, but with a body of their representatives, styled Elders, and that the whole visible Catholic Church, so far as their denomination is concerned, is not only one in name, but so united by a series of assemblies of these representatives, acting in the

name and by the authority of the whole, as to bind the whole body together as one church, walking by the same principles of faith and order, and voluntarily, yet authoritatively, governed by the same system of rule and regulation.”*

Wherever the ministers of the Word and Sacraments are officially equal; wherever representatives of the people, with their pastors, compose all ecclesiastical assemblies, from the lowest judicatory to the highest court of Review and Control,—though the judicatories may be styled the Session or the Consistory, the Presbytery or the Classis, the General Synod or the General Assembly,—there is *Presbyterianism*; and hence, notwithstanding some diversity in names, and in the minuter details of their ecclesiastical proceedings, the Reformed Churches in France, Holland, Germany, Switzerland, and Scotland, are all essentially Presbyterian.

But though the form of Church polity is

* For the most satisfactory information on this subject, see the late Rev. Dr. Miller's tract on "Presbyterianism."

not essential to salvation, or to the union of Christians with the Head of the Church, it is not to be viewed as wholly unimportant. To undervalue the form which may be adopted, would be quite as culpable, though not as absurd, as to deem it of primary moment. In the latter case, it were like regarding one's hand as a more vital organ than his heart; in the former, as if one should forego the use of his limbs because they might be severed from his body without terminating his life.

The government of a church, as that of a country, is important, inasmuch as one form more than another, tends to subserve the cause of order, of comfort, and of improvement.

It is not to be supposed that the Head of the Church arranged the principles of its government with no reference to its purity and peace—its growth and perpetuity; and therefore, it may be well to inquire, which, among the several Christian churches, may be considered as having, in most re-

spects, a scriptural warrant for their form of government? I say, in *most respects*; for though it may be an exposure of myself to the sneer of bigotry, I must acknowledge that, in my view, the plan of Church government as found in the New Testament is too indefinite, not in its principles but in their adjustment, to lead me to claim for any ecclesiastical system, an exact accordance with the scriptural model; and still less to admit the exclusive views often advocated.

You may attempt to prove, if you are so disposed, that Moses made the Priest's robe of such a quality, such a color, and such a shape; but that Paul ever thought of accurately adjusting the powers of a Church Session, much less that he should have fashioned the *mitre*, and made the very existence of the Church and the efficacy of Christ's atoning sacrifice, to depend on its uninterrupted transmission, is rather too severe a tax on our credulity!

If certainty in every respect were attainable, why is it that the greatest and best men

of the Church have ever been of a contrary judgment? Why is it that the most strenuous advocates of High Church principles prefer an appeal to the *Fathers* of a corrupt age, rather than to the writings of the Apostles? Or, if any definite polity was to be enjoined on the Church, and authoritatively conveyed from age to age, why is it that all the information which can be gathered from the New Testament is so incomplete, and to a certain extent so ambiguous; that there is not the most indistinct allusion to the importance of apostolical succession, nor to the necessity of any form of Church government in order to salvation?

But it cannot be;—such a system as Christianity never could have contemplated the minutiae of church government, or the binding force of any outward polity. Men, whose minds were fraught with stupendous truths, whose hearts burned with love for perishing souls, such men magnify “trifles light as air,” in comparison with the salvation of a dying world? The idea is prepos-

terous—only worthy of being referred to the darkness of the darkest age of the Church. No ; absorbed themselves in the “ weightier matters of the law,” it was reserved for their self-styled successors to pay the tithe “ of mint, anise, and cumin !”

The general principles of Church order, however, may be deduced from scriptural facts and incidents, and these, in our opinion, are decidedly in favor of the Presbyterian form. You are, of course, not surprised that I should express such an opinion. If there be any ground for surprise, it is because Presbyterians so seldom obtrude the claims of their church on public attention ; and because of their accustomed silence, it has been supposed that they themselves regard their ecclesiastical polity as not scripturally defensible.

But that our Church, so far as the radical principles of its government are concerned, approximates to the Church founded by the Apostles, as nearly, to say the least, as any other, however exclusive its claims,—

might be argued from the following historic facts,—that government by representatives elected by, and acting on behalf of the whole, is one of the earliest principles of Church order of which we have any knowledge; that it was adopted by God's ancient people while they were yet in Egypt; that it was the principle on which the government of the synagogues was conducted, and on which both the civil and ecclesiastical government of the Jews was conducted during the Mosaic economy; that there was not only a bench of elders in each synagogue, of which the Bishop, or "Angel of the Church," was the presiding officer, but also the great synagogue at Jerusalem to which appeals were admitted, and by which the whole Jewish people were bound together as one body; that the constitution of the synagogue was in all probability the form according to which the government of the Christian Church was modelled; that accordingly we read of "Elders having been ordained in every Church;" of "the Elders of the Church

having been called together ;” of the Elders of the Church being called for “ to visit and pray over the sick ;” of an important question being referred “ to the Apostles and Elders.” We find, that the Apostles were extraordinary officers, having been set apart as witnesses to the fact of Christ’s resurrection ; that they had no other relation to the collective body of Christians than that which arose from their peculiar position—a relation of dependence and subordination grounded in the nature of historical development, and which could not be repeated ; that if the nature of their office had admitted of the possibility of transmission, they were not commanded to transmit it, nor can there be adduced the smallest evidence that they did. We find that they preached to both Jew and Gentile, a religion without priest, altar, sacrifice, or temple, in the sense which had been previously attached to these terms ;*

* See “ The Kingdom of Christ,” delineated by Richard Whately, D. D., Archbishop of Dublin, pp. 103–136. Also, Neander’s “ History of the Christian Religion and Church.” Vol. i., pp. 178–179.

and therefore must have designed to exclude from the Christian Church any offices or rites analogous to the temple-service ; that preaching the gospel and administering the sacraments were the highest offices entrusted to the ministers of Christ ; that Christ commissioned no higher officers in the Church than those whom he empowered “ to teach and to baptize all nations ; ” that a plurality of elders were ordained in every Church ; that, though the circumstances of the early churches rendered Apostolic advice and authority proper and sometimes necessary, churches did exercise discipline without the intervention of an Apostle ; that Peter placed himself on a level with Presbyters as regarded the government of the churches ; that no church was under the watch and care of only a single officer ; that there was a distinction between the teaching and the ruling elders ; that the term Bishop in the Apostolic age was the distinguishing title of an overseer or pastor of a particular church ; that neither Titus nor Timothy

were either Apostles or prelates; that a church and a diocese were then co-extensive and identical—no one bishop or presbyter having pre-eminence; that the ordaining power was vested in the associated pastors of the churches, and exercised by “the laying on of the hands of the Presbytery;” that the only instances of ordination mentioned in the New Testament are essentially Presbyterial; that Paul and Barnabas themselves were ordained, not by the hands of the other apostles, but by the elders of Antioch; that Deacons were set apart to serve tables and to attend to the poor, and not to preach the Gospel—leaving the fair presumption that if Stephen and Philip preached the gospel, they must have been subsequently invested with the teaching office; and, finally, that the decrees of the Apostles and Elders at Jerusalem were sent down to all the churches.

Leaving the ground of inspired writ, it might be made to appear from the testimony of the early fathers, that in the Apostolic

age, bishop and presbyter were the same ; that a bishop was the superintendent or overseer of a single church ; that in every parish, a body of elders, with their bishop at their head, attended to the discipline of the church ; that all the bishops or pastors were, as respected their ecclesiastical powers, on an equality ; that no one possessed the exclusive right of ordaining, but that this right belonged in common to all who were empowered to preach the gospel ; and that this order in the church obtained until about the commencement of the third century, when the pastors of some of the metropolitan churches began to arrogate to themselves superior power, and were thus, through the growing corruptions of the times, gradually transformed, from the pastors of single churches, into “ lords over God’s heritage.”*

It might be argued, moreover, that this subversion of the original principles of church government, though it became, through a

* See Neander’s “History of the Christian Church,” Vol. i., p. 190.

worldly policy which had insinuated itself into the church, very general, was not universal; that there were witnesses in sack-cloth both to the doctrines which had been corrupted, and to the discipline which had been artfully subverted; that the Paulicians of the seventh century were succeeded by the Waldenses and Albigenses who also protested against the encroachments of Prelacy, while they adhered to the original principles of government, and rejected all human inventions in the worship of God; that some time before Calvin appeared on the stage of the Reformation, the doctrine of ministerial parity was introduced into Switzerland by Zwingle; and that, as the leaders of the Reformation, from their separate and independent study of the Holy Scriptures, came to the same clear conclusions respecting the essential verities of the gospel which had been altogether obscured and perverted to further the aims of a mercenary and ambitious priesthood, so did they all, from the conscientious study of the same Scriptures,

undesignedly concur in their view of church government as found in the New Testament; though some of them were of opinion that they were at liberty to modify it according to circumstances, and as the edification of the body of Christ seemed to require. Hence some minor diversities in the ecclesiastical order established by those who admitted the scriptural warrant for ministerial parity and the office of Ruling Elders. Hence, notwithstanding the fact that many of the most learned and pious friends of the Reformation in England, agreed with such men as Luther, Farel, Ecolampadius, Peter Martyr, Lasco, Junius, and Knox, in their views, that in the Apostolic church there was no Prelacy, yet in that country the system of Prelacy was retained, through the influence of the king and the court clergy, as being more in unison with the genius of monarchy.* Still, the early reformers of the English Church maintained an affectionate intercourse with the

* For convenient reference, see Macaulay's "History of England," Vol. i., pp. 39-41.

non-episcopal churches on the continent ; and while themselves adhering to Episcopal ordination, refrained from specifying either Episcopacy or Episcopal ordination as essential either to the organization of a church, or to a valid ministry. Nay, so far from laying claim to any divine right, they readily admitted the validity of Presbyterian ordination ; nor was it until clothed with hierarchic dignity by royal favor, and after they had unconsciously yielded to the intoxicating influences of pomp and power, that some among those who, during the period of their exile in the reign of Mary, had been of one mind and heart with the Reformers on the continent, began to question the right of any one to preach who would not admit that they themselves had a divine right to rule.*

We might argue, also, from the considerations of expediency in behalf of our form of government, and on the well known principle, that “power is dangerous in the hands of

* See the “Zurich Letters,” in connection with Neal’s “History of the Protestant Non-Conformists.”

the few, and that wisdom is seldom with the multitude," show that our ecclesiastical constitution is most happily balanced for resisting the encroachments of ambition on the one hand, and the turbulence of the popular will on the other,—for excluding error and enforcing discipline; while it is not to be overlooked that, in the nature and design of the several offices in our church, there is an admirable and truly philosophic provision for man's most urgent wants—the wants of his mind, of his heart, and of his body.

But it has been my object merely to advert to the reasons which influence us to regard our Church, as being, to say the least, as scriptural and as wise in its form of government, as that of any other church; and also to intimate distinctly that whenever it is necessary we may enter the list of controversy, and rebuke the arrogance of those worshippers of Sect who sometimes overween, and in their moments of hallucination, exclaim: *The temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, are WE!*

But, though the Presbyterian Church may adduce such an array of fact and argument in favor of her order, she is neither a bigoted nor a proselyting church. Attached, as she should be, to her own polity, highly valuing it both on account of its subservience to the interests of true religion, and the stability of our free institutions, yet she never wantonly invades the precincts, nor assails the peculiarities of other churches. All she asks of others, is the liberty which she is so forward to grant to them,—that of believing and acting according to their respective and intelligent conviction of the truths of God's most Holy Word. It is not for her to condemn other branches of Zion.—To his own Master every one standeth or falleth. Though she cannot conscientiously admit the pretensions of sectarists, yet she denies to none who embrace the fundamental truths of religion, the name of Christian churches; nor does she endeavor “to prevent others from casting out devils” because they follow not in her steps; much less unchurch others because they

will not defer to her authority. Resting the claims of her ministers, not on some imaginary sacramental virtue transmitted in a supposed succession of prelates from the Apostles, but on the fact of their having been called of God, commissioned by Christ, and regularly appointed officers of a visible Christian church, she never deems it expedient to deny the ordination of the ministers of other Christian communities, in order to establish the validity of her own ordinances. With the characteristic magnanimity of conscious truth and security, she grants to others what is often withheld from herself. Nor covetous of the favor of the world, does she ever vaunt her own claims to disparage others, or attack others, but to defend herself.

In accessions to her communion she would rejoice; but not at the expense of other branches of Zion. Nay, without any token of disapprobation, she permits her members to connect themselves with other evangelical churches; and in no case, does "she com-

pass sea and land" to make one proselyte to her form. With her, to be a Christian—a *new creature in Christ Jesus*, is of more account than to be called a Presbyterian, an Episcopalian, a Baptist, or a Methodist; while she often invites the ministers of other churches to her pulpits, and is always ready to unite in proper ways with other denominations in works of love and mercy.

Perhaps she has erred on the score of liberality. Hence, some with whom she united in efforts for a common cause, have endeavored to undermine her polity; and others, the validity of whose ordinances she admitted, have endeavored to drain her ministry, and draw from her communion.

Had she adopted a selfish policy; had her preaching, journals, tracts, and catechisms, from the first, been strongly sectarian; had she infected the susceptible minds of her children with the idea that theirs was the only true church, and that without her "pale" there was no "covenanted mercy" for the sons of men; had she strenuously denied the validity of

ordination in other churches, as she might, with quite as much propriety as they have denied that of her ministers; and had she invested the sacraments with a mysteriously efficacious virtue, and at the same time compromised with the maxims and customs of the world, she might, as an ecclesiastical organization, have been more extended, and seemingly more consolidated; but by such a policy, she had increased in external strength, at the dread expense of internal soundness.

May the time never come when she shall merge the character of a Christian church into that of a proselyting Sect. Woe be to her, should she exalt any ordinance above essential Christianity; if she ever dare to place the principles of church government upon a level with Christ's atoning sacrifice—the only hope of a lost world! Let her become impoverished, or mean in the eye of the world; let her dwindle to the obscurest Church; but God forbid, that she *should glory save in the cross of Christ.*

No point can be more clearly established

and illustrated by Church history than this,—that to exalt the ritual and ecclesiastical elements of religion to a position of equality with the spiritual, is a course most certainly fatal to the integrity of Christian faith and practice.

But notwithstanding that spirit of charity which has ever actuated the Church, in relation to all evangelical denominations, she has encountered much opposition, and incurred enmity. The reasons for this may be traced to the several facts—

I. That in accordance with the fundamental principle of her creed, she has ever adhered to the Bible as the only infallible rule of faith and practice. So far from blending Scripture with tradition, or viewing tradition as an authority either co-ordinate with, or subordinate to, Scripture; the Church has been most scrupulously careful to separate every precedent or dogma of antiquity, by a wide remove, from the authority of Inspiration; while she loves to honor and exalt

the word of God, as at once the all-sufficient and only authoritative rule. Whatever accusations may be made against her, it cannot be said with the least shadow of truth or justice, that she has ever "rejected the commandment of God that she might keep her own tradition." It matters not how ingenious the arguments, or expedient the motives which may be presented ; however formidable the array of patristic names that may be marshalled, or positive the decrees of awe-inspiring councils that may be reiterated in angry tones—nothing can have any influence on her conscientious faith and practice, so long as it cannot be made to appear to her clear conviction, that the article or the rite is warranted either by a "Thus saith the Lord," or by a legitimate inference from Holy Scripture.

Hence, she rejected all the superstitious and demoralizing rites, as well as the authority of the See of Rome, and still objects to all ghostly devices in the worship of God : being fully aware, that the moment we de-

part from the authority of God's word, there can be no end, as ecclesiastical history serves to illustrate, to either the suggestions of vanity, or the perversions of expediency.

Hence, too, the cause of her memorable conflict in the sixteenth century with the monarch and prelates of the English Church who, sympathizing to a great extent with Romish usages, were in favor of an imposing ritual ; who, regarding less the rights of conscience than the multiplicity of their forms, branded the non-conformists as Puritans, persecuted them with envenomed hate ; and when neither sophistry nor force could prevail with the champions of the Bible, contrived, by employing ridicule, to create a prejudice against them, which the Church of England to this day has been at no pains to remove. Hence, also, being well aware that all usurped and arbitrary power is hazardous to the interests of revealed truth, no matter with what caution and meekness it may at first be exercised, the Church still objects to the authoritative interpretation of Scripture ;

demanding no assent *even to her own creed*, except so far as that creed is sanctioned by the *teachings of God's holy word*; ever referring her members to the "law and the testimony" that the faith of each may be, not a hereditary prejudice, nor a mere intellectual conviction, but the "belief of the heart unto righteousness."

In this, the fundamental principle of her creed, we have reason to rejoice. As the original cause of all divisions, the source of all corruptions in the Christian Church, may be traced to early departures from the primitive doctrine and discipline of the Church, so the only remedy for these divisions and errors is a return to the Scriptures, as the only rule, and as containing all that is necessary to saving faith.

II. Prejudice has been excited against the Church by the opponents of her doctrinal system, who, either through a want of knowledge, or a great want of candor—it may be from a conscious inability to meet us on fair ground—have characterized it as

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a system at once repugnant to the best sentiments of our nature, and dishonorable to God's perfections ; tending either to despair, or to presumption ; to Pharisaism, or to licentiousness : as if the Westminster divines in their formulary of "The Doctrines of Grace," had not been furnished by Paul himself with all their fundamental positions—that "by the offence of one judgment came upon all men to condemnation ;" that "all have sinned and come short of the glory of God ;" that "by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight ;" that "by grace ye are saved through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God ;" that "whom he did predestinate, them he also called, and whom he called them he also justified, and whom he justified, them he also glorified ;" "that as sin hath reigned unto death, even so might grace reign through righteousness unto eternal life, by *Jesus Christ our Lord.*" As if these scriptural views were foreign from the doctrinal sentiments of Augustine and Claudius, or

of Wickliffe and Huss, our system of doctrine has been regarded as an invention of Calvin ! As if Cranmer had had no agency in kindling the flames which consumed the bodies of Ann Askew and Joanna Bocher, or Laud had been a paragon of goodness, the “ burning of Servetus,” has been charged on the influence of the Calvinistic creed ! As if the persecutors of the “ two thousand ejected ministers” in the reign of Charles II., had been the most noble-minded and godly men that the world had ever seen, all the evils of those unhappy times have been ascribed to the ascetic and intolerant spirit of Calvinism ! In short, no creed has ever been more misrepresented. From various quarters it has received all the epithets of abuse and contumely with which the name of Luther was branded by the Romanists. At one time, the most illogical inferences have been drawn from some of our doctrinal positions to counteract their force ; and again they have been so perverted as to convey the impression to not a few minds, that we hold sentiments

the most abhorrent from all reason and religion :—as though a Church, whose only rule of faith is the pure word of God, could possibly regard him as a tyrant, or man the victim of an arbitrary power ! As though the ministry of a Church, which has been so successful in “ winning souls to Christ,” could ever have represented God as the author of sin, man a machine, or the whole plan of salvation a system of iron-handed fate ! But which of us can be so ignorant as not to know, that one of the prominent devices of Satan, is to attack the Bible through the medium of that system of doctrine which it teaches—to aim at the Head through the medium of his body, the Church ?

It cannot be denied, however, that when the creed of the Church is fairly represented, —though it receives ample support from the word of God ; though it is substantially the same as that which was maintained by the witnesses for the truth, and by the great body of the Reformers ; though it is obnoxious to fewer speculative objections than any opposing system, and though its moral influ-

ence, wherever it has been cordially embraced, has been seen to be, through all the relations and in all circumstances of human life, eminently pure and happy,—yet that it is in no wise fitted to conciliate the natural heart: so humbling is it to human pride, so uncompromising its claims on our obedience, and so inseparably connected with self-denial and spirituality of mind. Clear is it, as the truth of the Gospel, that “the things of the Spirit are spiritually discerned;” that “the carnal mind is enmity against God;” and these considerations constitute, in brief, another reason why the Church is so far from being held in favorable repute by those who, if they dare not deny the Bible to be a revelation from Heaven, would be left to interpret it according to the dictates of their understanding, the suggestions of their pride, or the interest of their sect; who would substitute works for faith, formality for devotion, baptism for regeneration, communing for Christian character, or a respect for religion and its ordinances for a godly,

sober, and righteous life ; and especially among those, on the one hand, who would shut out from sinful men those solemn scenes which await them beyond the grave ; and on the other, among those who, arrogating to themselves the sole right to officiate in the Church of Christ, would teach the people to expect no other pardon than that which it is their prerogative to dispense ; to hope for no other salvation than that which flows through their ordinances !

III. Besides, the discipline of the Church is proverbially strict. Being the guardian of the sacred oracles, she must be invested with authority to punish any who may violate the principles of her charge ; or, viewed simply as a body corporate, it cannot preserve itself unless, like other lawful societies, it has a disciplinary power over its own members. Divest it of this spiritual control, and the Church no longer exists save in name ;—its faith, its purity, its peace, all are gone ! Hence the government of the Church opens no door for the entrance of error or of irreli-

gion to her communion. It invites no selfist, no fashionist, no devotee of worldly honor or of sensual pleasure, to her solemn feasts. It thrusts from her holy altars all who live in the habitual violation of known duty ; while it promptly deposes the office-bearer who either departs from the faith, or violates morality ; nor will deference to her polity make ample amends for defection from her doctrinal standards.

This feature of the Church has not met the approbation of those who would blend error with truth ; serve God and mammon ; reconcile religion and the world ; or who hate discipline because they love their sins ; and for this reason, some who have left her communion, would conceal the laxity of their own principles, by exaggerating the rigid features of Presbyterial discipline.

IV. Her ministry, too, demands pure hearts and strong minds—men of intellect, of learning, and of piety. Something more is needed besides voice, and manner, and a correct moral deportment, to secure comfort

and success, or even respect in her ministry. Without a heart for the great end of the ministry, her mode of worship will be found to be both laborious and irksome ; without a vigorous and well-furnished intellect, no one can give permanent satisfaction. Hence, her pulpit presents but little attraction to men of cold hearts or of feeble heads. Hence, some have left her pulpits, and to cover the mortification of their failure either to receive a call, or to sustain themselves in a charge, have, forsooth, had *their qualms* as to the validity of their ordination by the laying on of the hands of the presbytery !

V. Let it be considered, moreover, that Presbyterianism is the great obstacle in the way both of clerical assumption and of popular excitement ; that it has no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, no tolerance for damning heresies, no sympathy with formalism on the one hand, and with fanaticism on the other ; that it is unfriendly to nothing but ignorance, and bigotry, and superstition, and error, and vice, and op-

pression, and you have at a glance the complication of causes which, in different minds and among different interests, have operated, and may continue to operate, to its prejudice. It is the opposition of human inventions to the word of God—of sinister and worldly ends to the interests of Christ's Kingdom.

Still the Church has no cause to be disheartened or intimidated. At no time has she enjoyed the smile of the world but when faithless to her glorious Head. The purer in doctrine, the more spiritual in worship, the more energetic in discipline she may have been at any period of her history, the more has she been exposed to obloquy. And how can railing accusations be prevented so long as she does not accommodate her standards to the world's notions? The Church of Christ is necessarily antagonistic to all the errors and vices of the world. The strictest signification of the word is, the company of those who have been *called out of the world* to be servants of God and the citizens of Heaven! "Ye are not of the world, even

as I am not of the world." "Ye shall be holy unto me," said God to the Church of old ; "for I, the Lord, am holy, and have severed you from other people that ye should be mine."

Whatever the reasons of opposition to her form of government, none can more effectually protect the rights, and secure the interests of both minister and people ; none involves less necessity for extra voluntary associations, or furnishes greater facilities for either equitable judicial decisions, energetic discipline, or the most extended and harmonious co-operation. Her Creed may not be, as to its every letter, unexceptionable ; but taken as a system—for that is all it purports to be—what system is so conformable to the word of God ? Her mode of worship, though not imposing, accords with the mind of the Spirit, and with the custom of the early Christians ; and though some may deem it too simple, let it be recollected that uncommanded rites and forms were multiplied for the sake of attracting minds which had been addicted to supersti-

tious practices ; that human nature has ever been perversely disposed to substitute a ritual for a spiritual worship ; and that it was through the decline of true piety that Christianity, by the fourth century, was converted into a religion of church mysteries, church mummeries, and church despotism.*

Our system has the three orders or classes of church officers, while our ministers are bishops in the primitive sense ; and whether it be intellect, learning, eloquence, or piety and devotedness, they are not surpassed by those of any other communion. But I may not indulge in invidious comparisons. Let others be as they may—all that enters into the constitution of a regular Christian church, is found within our pale ; all, too, that serves to form a respectable and influential denomination. I will not point you to our numerous and magnificent church edifices, our men of wealth and honor, of intelligence and probity, the number of our

* See "Ancient Christianity," by Isaac Taylor, p. 334.

educated clergy, the number of our presbyteries, or the number of our communicants. In what church will you find purer doctrine and more heartfelt piety? Where a greater readiness to encounter obloquy and scorn, yea, the loss of all things for conscience' sake? Where is it that preaching is more evangelical and faithful? From what section of the visible Church do prayers more ardent ascend to Heaven? From whom do the poor heathen receive more sympathy, and the far distant missionary more effective aid? And where can you find so large a body of men, so united in their theological views, and so generally at peace?

It is true that she has had her difficulties and trials from false friends and open enemies; but what church has not? It is true that she was for some years a divided church; but her experience in this respect has not been peculiar. There is now most serious division in the Church of England; and, unless a regard for its polity counteract the regard for its articles, merging the love of

truth into the pride of outward union, "the Oxford tracts" have paved the way for the formal, as they have already effected a doctrinal, division in the American episcopate.

It may be that difficulties and divisions are inseparable from the condition of the church militant. They cannot be prevented unless all freedom of thought and expression be precluded, unless the heart be palsied through fear, and the mind chained down by the hand of ghostly despotism. Hence the boast of outward unity is the prerogative of the Romish Church; but as well might the palsy boast to the man it has benumbed, "It is *I* that free you from stitches and pains."

But since the Church was planted on the shores of the New World, how has the Head of the body ever been with her to guide and to guard her, and to prosper the work of her hands! Then, one little spot of ground served for her only altar, and the little band of her members: now, in almost every section of our extended territory, you will find her

order, her doctrine, her worship. From a single person, her ministry has swelled to hundreds; from a single church to thousands; from a few communicants to hundreds of thousands; from the solitary study of a pastor, her facilities for the thorough education of candidates for the ministry, are well endowed seminaries; from one pastor, himself a missionary to this western wilderness, how many missionaries to heathen lands!

But during the years of her pilgrimage in this land, how has she contended against the foes of both civil and religious freedom! How has she ever withstood all immoral practices and all false doctrine! What patriots and what Christians have been nursed in her bosom! How many have been baptized at her fonts! How many have encircled her altars! What multitudes has she instrumentally brought "from nature's darkness into the marvellous light of the gospel!" How much ignorance has she enlightened, wretchedness relieved, and sor-

row consoled ! O how many who once sat beneath the droppings of her sanctuaries, and sung the songs of Zion, are now bowing before the throne, ascribing salvation unto the Lamb ! Where are her Witherspoons and Rodgers “ whose doctrine and whose life coincident ” gave ample proof that they were honest in the sacred work ? Where her Tennents and Davies, whose preaching startled the dull, cold ear of an unbelieving world, and awoke multitudes to the momentous concerns of death and eternity ? Where her Kollocks and Masons, whose eloquence convinced the most skeptical and touched the most obdurate ? her Wilsons and Millers, whose learning established her principles and baffled her adversaries ? her Blackburns and McMillans, who first crossed the Alleghanies to carry the lamp of life to our western borders ? her Ralstons and Bayards, who ruled so well in the house of God, because they first ruled themselves ?— All these are sleeping in her tombs ; but their intellect survives, their spirit lives,

stimulating other minds, firing other hearts to the service of God and the world !

Ever does it become us to give thanks when we recall the past, and ever to bless God that great and sore as may have been her occasional trials, they have resulted only in rendering her purer in doctrine, sounder in learning, more faithful in preaching, more dependent in feeling, more harmonious in view and co-operative in action.

Never has our Church enjoyed more outward prosperity than at present. We see the evidence of this, not only in the harmony of its different sections, in the character and mental strength of its ministry, in the conspicuity and influence of many of its congregations, and in the efficiency of its various Boards, but even in the church edifices which have of late been built, or are now in the process of erection.

It is, therefore, with feelings of more than ordinary interest that I meet you to-day, men and brethren, in the new house which

you have erected for the worship of the God of your fathers; and in the name of the Church, I thank you for your liberality, and your efforts in behalf of her interests in this city. Still my feelings of interest on this occasion are blended with melancholy reminiscences. I had indeed long felt that there was need for a new church edifice; and that, owing to the advancing spirit of the times, there were special reasons against all delay in the contemplated work of re-building; nevertheless, it caused me emotions—I had almost said of painful regret—when I learned that the old church had been demolished, and the thought rose in my mind that I should never re-enter the pulpit where my ministry of the Word commenced; where my youthful efforts in the cause of Christ were encouraged by an affectionate people, and where I had the unspeakable satisfaction of seeing the work of the Lord prospering through my humble instrumentality. How many tender memories throng my mind as I revert to that old pulpit, and to the people

who so unanimously called me and faithfully sustained me, and to whom I was wont to administer, as God gave me strength, all the lights, and succors, and consolations of his precious word; many of whom, ah! how many! I have lived to see one after another go down to the silent tomb.

About eighteen years have passed since I stood in that old pulpit, and charged you “to keep in memory what things I had preached unto you;” and when I then bade you farewell as your pastor, so feeble was my health, that I never expected to re-enter that pulpit, much less live to stand where I now do, and see what now greets my eye.

Ah! what a change has taken place in the congregation to which I was wont to minister! I look in vain for this, and that, and the other, well-remembered face. “The fathers, where are they?” and when I think how many, who were wont to worship with us, are now mouldering in the grave, I cannot refrain from asking,—“Why have I been spared?” nor from thanking God that I have

been spared to greet you on such an occasion as this. Though still in the prime of life, I am, in the providence of God, the oldest surviving minister of this Church; and who shall say that I have not been spared for some good purpose, since I am here this day to remind you of the faith once delivered unto the saints—of the faith and practice of your fathers—of the weighty scriptural reasons which led them to cherish an attachment to the doctrine and order of the Church, and of the motives which should induce you to cordial and steadfast co-operation in all that pertains to the welfare of Zion; yea, in the name of Him in whom your fathers believed, and in behalf of the Church of which He, even Christ, is the head, to bid you *God speed*,—to incite you to extricate this structure from all pecuniary incumbrance, and to attend and sustain the ministry here established.

For, though the old edifice has given place to the new, the old system of faith and practice will here remain; though this edifice is more adapted to the taste of the times, there

will be in this place no adaptation to the skeptical and irreligious temper of the times. Your mental and moral wants differ not from theirs who have gone before you. Your relations to God and eternity are the same as theirs were ; your need of pardon, sanctification and salvation, the same as theirs ; death and judgment, heaven and hell, are still the same stupendous realities ! We may build a new church, but we cannot have a new gospel ; “for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved.” We may dig deep the foundations, and raise the walls in massive strength, and secure “the long-drawn aisle and fretted vault,” and enjoy “the dim religious light” streaming through shaded windows, and receive the tribute of passers-by to the fitting order and beauty of the edifice, but it cannot be scripturally dedicated to the worship of our God in Christ, unless we ourselves in spirit and by faith, have built upon “the foundations of

the Apostles and Prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the Chief Corner Stone.”

He, then, for whose service this house has been erected, is that great and glorious Being who has revealed his mind and will to us in the Holy Scriptures—the triune God, Jehovah. Here he is to be worshipped in sincerity and truth, and in the name of Jesus Christ his Son, our Saviour. Here the voice of prayer and supplication for us and all men, is to ascend. Here God’s praises are to be rehearsed in exalted verse. Here his word is to be read, and his servants are to expound and inculcate his most holy will. Here the holy rite of baptism is to be administered in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost; and here, from time to time, the holy Eucharist is to be dispensed to the whole company of the faithful. Here the rich and the poor are to meet together, remembering that God is the maker of us all. Here you are to come up from Sabbath to Sabbath to attend to the things which belong to your everlasting peace. No

heartlessness should ever mark the music of this sanctuary, no hypocrisy deform its worship, no worldliness approach its altar, no pride of intellect, no love of mammon prostitute this desk, nor listlessness obstruct the appropriate influence of the preached word. This house has been erected for God's glory and the soul's good.

Let us, then, rise and call upon the name of God, and in solemn prayer, duly set it apart to the purposes which have been specified.

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How dreadful is this place ! This is none other but the house of God ! It is God's house—for his *service* ; never to be used for any purpose not strictly scriptural and religious. *God's* house—for the regular Sabbath administration of his most holy word and ordinances. *God's* house—for the worship of his people, and for his messenger of grace to make known here his overtures of mercy to guilty men ; where you may assemble—where, as often as his holy day

returns, you are bound, by all that is sacred and all that is of deathless moment, to assemble; and where, as often as you assemble, you are all here *present before God*.

Woe be to him who shall ever stand here and minister for self, not for God;—to inculcate damning error, not the truth as it is in Jesus! And woe be to those who shall ever pervert this house from the purposes to which it has now been solemnly dedicated!

Men and brethren, I am no prophet, but an unworthy ambassador for God in Christ; and in his name I declare unto you that weighty interests crowd around this sacred desk. The Word henceforth to be preached from this desk, will be “the savor of life unto life, or of death unto death.” While this church shall stand, many a soul will here be instructed, and disciplined, and sanctified for heaven; or hardened in its impenitence and unbelief, and fitted for destruction. No trifling ceremony this, in which we are engaged; no transient interests are involved in the dedication of this church. As surely as

Christ is the Head of the body, so surely is this church connected with God's purposes of grace towards lost sinners. As surely as there is a heaven and a hell, so surely does this church bear a relation to your endless weal or woe. Nay, this very occasion may be the occasion of endless joy or of endless woe to all of us now assembled.

Oh that the opening of this new church might be the means of opening every impenitent heart to the belief and acknowledgment of the truth! Oh that this day of dedication, my brethren, might be the day of your renewed devotement to God's service and glory!

We live at a period of peculiar trial to all Christ's true followers—a period marked by unbelief, and apathy, and declensions, and apostasies: owing in part to the encroachments of worldliness on the Church, to the secularizing tendency of the times, and to the untoward influence of much that passes under the name of literature and science; but chiefly to the “mystery of iniquity” which has worked from the beginning, and

now works with renewed energy, and more cunning craftiness.

Through what untried scenes the Church may be led, I know not, nor will I venture to predict; but this is certain—if we forget our dependence on the Head of the Church, he will leave us to learn wisdom from the bitter fruits of our own counsels. If we pride ourselves on the intellect of our ministry, or the piety of our communion, we may expect to see many a great man fall, and many a zealous man decline. If we attach more importance to the things in which we differ from other parts of the visible Church, than to those in which we agree—with all our array of scriptural evidence, of historic fact, and philosophic induction, yet destitute of *charity*—we shall be “as sounding brass and as a tinkling cymbal.” If we think more of making proselytes to Presbyterianism than converts to Christianity, we may succeed; but the church where our fathers worshipped God, and communed with Christ, and enjoyed an ante-past of Heaven, will

become “a whited sepulchre, full of rottenness and dead men’s bones.”

If we are not on our guard against the speculations of a vain philosophy, against the insidious love of gain and honor, against the enervating influences of luxurious and fashionable life, and the seductions of outward show, we shall lose our *piety* as a Church; and then farewell to our harmony, our efficiency, our usefulness! With no imposing ceremonial, with no sectarian prejudices carefully infused into the minds of our children, no superstitious fears, no round of outward forms to which we have become wedded—alas! what are we, what have we, if the Spirit of God depart from us! Tell us not of our doctrine, our worship, our discipline—all will be as cold, and unattractive, and inert, as this goodly framework, “so curiously and wonderfully made,” after the spirit has taken its everlasting flight!

O be true to the Church; not by vaunting the *scriptural warrant* of Presbyterianism, but by surrendering yourselves into captivity

to the obedience of Christ the Head of the body ; not by adopting new modes of faith, or other ways of doing good, according to the humors of either visionary or ambitious religionists, but by adhering to Jesus Christ, “the Way, the Truth, and the Life ;” not by boasting of its orthodoxy, nor by admiring the simplicity of its worship ; but by practising its doctrines ; worshipping God in spirit and in truth ; uniting in every good word and work ; strenuously supporting your ordinances, and aiming to extend the knowledge of the glorious gospel of the grace of God—O yes ; by glorifying God in his Church on earth, that you may be admitted to the Church triumphant, when all the ransomed of the Lord, from every portion of the Church militant, shall enter Heaven *with songs and everlasting joy upon their heads !*











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